

## Paganism and the British Folk Revival

Andy Letcher

Folk music in Britain has never been more popular. A nationwide calendar of folk festivals and a thriving scene of folk clubs, pub sessions and ceilidhs, all support a body of professional and semi-professional artists and a groundswell of amateur players. Newcastle University runs a popular folk music degree course, the mainstream media review the major folk releases and artistic accomplishment is recognised through the BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards. In 2006 BBC 4 produced an acclaimed three part documentary about the history of the folk revival, *Folk Britannia*, and in 2010 editor of *The Wire* magazine, Rob Young, published his monumental and even broader history, *Electric Eden: Unearthing Britain's Visionary Music*<sup>1</sup>, to plaudits from both the literary and musical worlds.

In spite of this success, 'folk' remains a contested term. It is not easy to say with any great precision what does or does not count as folk music (added to which, the term has rather different connotations within the different Anglophone nations). Because folk music is, by definition, so bound up with notions of tradition and authenticity, what it *signifies* has come to be every bit as important as what it sounds like and how it is played. Consequently its borders are being continually negotiated.

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<sup>1</sup> Rob Young, *Electric Eden: Uncovering Britain's Visionary Music* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010).

Part of folk's appeal is that it confers alterity through identification with tradition and the past. That past tends for the most part to be heavily romanticised, typically as a rustic, pre-Industrial or prelapsarian golden age, a simpler time of honest labour and straightforward pleasures, and as something lost to us or very nearly forgotten (Georgina Boyes beautifully captures the object of folk's yearning with her memorable phrase 'the imagined village'<sup>2</sup>). Both Left and Right have subsequently tried to claim folk music, and the past it signifies, as their own, regarding it as the authentic voice of the working class, or as a pure expression of the people, or folk, from a lost age of modesty, tradition and deference, respectively<sup>3</sup>.

But it is another aspect of the past that concerns me here, for, if we trace the folk tradition back far enough, don't we come to an 'archaeological' layer that predates Christianity? In other words, aren't the origins of folk music, ultimately, pagan? This assumption, which is widely accepted in popular culture, forms a kind of lodestone about which modern folk musicians orientate themselves. Some celebrate it or regard it as the quiddity of folk. Others maintain a healthy distance from what they regard as a troubling episode in their music's history.

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<sup>2</sup> Georgina Boyes, *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Boyes, *The Imagined Village*; Andrew Blake, *The Land Without Music: Music, Culture and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997); Niall MacKinnon, *The British Folk Scene: Musical Performance and Social Identity* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1994); Young, *Electric Eden*. This struggle is ongoing. When the far-Right British National Party attempted to use contemporary folk recordings in their campaigning leading up to the 2010 general election, they elicited a swift and angry response from folk musicians and the formation of the pressure group, Folk Against Fascism.

In this chapter I want to examine contemporary British folk music, in its widest sense, to describe the three broad ways in which musicians relate to the supposed pagan origins of their craft. Modern Pagans<sup>4</sup> have seized upon the relationship to claim folk music as theirs and to use it as a vehicle for the expression of religious identity: ‘Pagan folk’. Others, making so-called ‘dark folk’, and who may not necessarily be practising Pagan religionists, are drawn to the alterity of identifying with an uncanny pagan past, one supposed to have involved not only a close and magical connection with nature but also sexual licence and, occasionally, heinous ritual. Finally, there are those mainstream or ‘traditional folk’ musicians who might invoke the pagan past occasionally for rhetorical ends but mostly regard it as problematic in some way.

I want to begin, however, by challenging the very idea that British traditional music has pagan origins. I want to demonstrate that this notion derives ultimately from the wishful thinking of Edwardian scholars, who were, in turn, influenced by a popular misunderstanding of Darwinian evolution. Traditional music in Britain is categorically not of pagan provenance, but the indelible assumption that it is – and the need for that assumption to be true – tell us much about the popularity of folk and paganism today.

Before I do I must declare an interest. Though I am writing as an academic, a Scholar of Religion who specializes in Paganism, Psychedelic Spiritualities, and the impact of Darwinism on Western thought, I am also writing as a Pagan and a folk musician. I am an

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<sup>4</sup> Following British convention I refer to pre-Christian religions as ‘pagan’, lower case, and modern revived or reconstructed religions – known in the US as neo-Paganism – as ‘Pagan’, upper case.

unusual Pagan, partly because I do not currently belong to any group or identify with any tradition, but mostly because I am engaged in a continuing process of reflexive negotiation between – put simply – my heart and my head. As a relatively new religion, Paganism has yet to adopt a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ towards its tenets (except within some rarefied academic circles). My own academically-driven ‘suspicion’ led me to abandon much of what I once held to be foundational Pagan beliefs and practices. Nevertheless, my Pagan identity remains, and my ongoing ‘project’, if you will, is to find a robust Pagan theology that will satisfy heart *and* head.

Similarly, as a song-writer and an instrumentalist – fronting ‘post-folk’ band *Telling the Bees* and playing English bagpipes for the French/Breton/Swedish dancing that is currently popular in the south of England – I am necessarily positioned in the ongoing debate about what folk music is, is not, or ought to be. What follows is, therefore, the world as I see it, from my situated and nuanced perspective, and is offered as part of an ongoing dialogical process of narrative enquiry<sup>5</sup>.

### **Constructing the ‘folk’, constructing ‘the pagan’**

In 1903, Cecil Sharp, one time bank clerk and Oxford-educated musician, overheard a Somerset labourer singing a traditional song while at work, mowing the grass. Sharp was so moved by (the appropriately named) John England’s rendition of ‘the Seeds of Love’ that he rushed for his notebook to transcribe it. Thus began Sharp’s love affair with

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<sup>5</sup> Gavin Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell, 1999).

English folk song, which later expanded to include folk dance. Along with other contemporaries – the Reverend Sabine Baring Gould, Francis J. Child, George Butterworth, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Lucy Broadwood and Ernest J. Moeran, to name a few – Sharp began collecting, notating and publishing folk songs (albeit in a somewhat sanitised form) and proselytising for their dissemination in the classroom, and beyond as a kind of ‘national music’.

The word ‘folk’ itself has German origins and is particularly associated with the Romantic philosopher, Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803). Herder, writing before German unification, drew attention to the importance of the German language, which was widely disparaged by German intellectuals at the time, and the significance of ordinary people, the *volk*. The *volk*, he argued, were not an illiterate rabble of pitchfork waving peasants, but the very soil from which language, culture and ultimately nationhood itself sprang. Left to flourish, each distinct *volk* – shaped by climate and terrain – would be predisposed to evolve a unique form of political organization tailored to its character. We should therefore delineate and arrange nations on the basis of these ‘organic communities’, which would be easily picked out by commonalities of language, custom and culture<sup>6</sup>. Such was his vision for a united Germany, which, in the light of subsequent events, now seems highly problematic.

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<sup>6</sup> F. M. Barnard, *Herder's Social and Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965); William A. Wilson, “Herder, Folklore and Romantic Nationalism,” in *Folklore: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies. Volume 2*, ed. Alan Dundes (London: Routledge, 2005).

But prior to the rise of National Socialism (inspired, in part, by Herder's nationalism), Herder's influence was regarded more benignly and we can see the traces of his ideas at work in Sharp's understanding of folk music. Sharp defined the folk song as "the unaided composition of the [musically] unskilled"<sup>7</sup>. Handed down and changed by many generations it is nevertheless a 'spontaneous utterance'<sup>8</sup>, 'a communal and racial product, the expression in musical idiom of aims and ideals that are primarily national in character'<sup>9</sup>. By recording and preserving folk music, Sharp and his contemporaries believed they were saving something quintessentially English, something that modernity was in danger of stripping away. (As we shall see, this idea, that the tradition needs to be protected from the times, remains central to folk.)

Sharp was less concerned about the question of origins than many of his contemporaries, who argued about whether folk songs had been originally composed by individuals or collectively in groups. For Sharp, every folk song was made anew each time it was performed. Songs were like "the acorns which fell last autumn from an oak. The tree is, perhaps, an old one and has its roots in the past, but the acorns are the products of a season's growth"<sup>10</sup>. The search for origins was therefore a rather futile exercise. He did, however, concede that "Wassail songs, and carols associated with the May-day festival,

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<sup>7</sup> Cecil Sharp, *English Folk Song: Some Conclusions* (London: Simkin & Co. Ltd.), 7.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, x.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 125.

are pagan survivals”<sup>11</sup>. That he could make such an adamant yet unsupported assertion was due to another related and widely held discourse of the time: the idea that all manner of folk customs, rites, dances, legends and even children’s rhymes and games, were relics of an ancient fertility cult centred on an annually dying and reborn vegetation god. This discourse, likewise, can be traced back, in part, to German romanticism.

Herder’s nationalistic writings famously inspired the brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm to begin collecting *märchen*, or fairy-tales. The brothers worked under the assumption that these stories were expressions of what Herder had termed the *volksgeist*, the spirit of the folk, and therefore that the tales captured and encapsulated some unique German-ness<sup>12</sup>. Jacob Grimm (1785-1863) was similarly inspired by Herder to produce his monumental philological study of the German language, his *Geschichte der Deutschen Sprache* of 1848. Like fellow philologists of the time, Grimm had discovered that languages not only change through time (for the worse, he thought) but they also split and divide, giving birth to new tongues<sup>13</sup>. Two implications followed.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 101.

<sup>12</sup> See Stefan Arvidsson, “Aryan Mythology as Science and Ideology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67, no. 2 (1999), 327-354.

<sup>13</sup> Guy Deutscher, *The Unfolding of Language: The Evolution of Mankind’s Greatest Invention* (London: Arrow Books, 2006).

First, working backwards, there must have been an original language from which all others sprang, an *ursprache* (literally, the language of Ur, the Babylonian city where according to Biblical mythology the tower of Babel was built<sup>14</sup>).

Second, if language degenerates through time – Grimm thought the High Gothic of the Middle Ages the pinnacle of German expression – then so would any remnants of pre-Christian mythology, preserved, as they had to have been, in the amber of language. Fairy tales, for Grimm, were the vestigial and decrepit remains of a once much greater, but now lost, epic cycle of Germanic, pagan mythology. As he thought the traces of paganism also lingered in customs, folklore, legends, Gothic architecture and laws, he reasoned that just as it were possible to work backwards to reconstruct the original *ursprache*, so it would be possible to work backwards and reconstruct a picture of the original ur-religion, from which these pagan remnants must have come.

Scholars agree now that Grimm's premise was flawed. Fairy tales are not degenerate myths<sup>15</sup>; the idea of pagan survivals in customs, folklore and architecture has been scotched<sup>16</sup>; and the traces of paganism preserved in language (such as our 'Wednesday' –

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<sup>14</sup> Today linguists refer to this tongue as proto Indo-European, Deutscher, *The Unfolding of Language*.

<sup>15</sup> See Alan Dundes ed., *Folklore: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies. Volumes 1 and 2* (London: Routledge, 2005) *passim*.

<sup>16</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1991); Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).



Woden's Day) are wholly insufficient to reconstruct original practices<sup>17</sup>. But Grimm made the attempt in his four volume *Deutsche Mythologie* (1835-78). Regarding Teutonic paganism as a pure, if occasionally misguided, expression of the German volksgeist, he wrote of it in rather fond terms as a happy, sensual, honourable and law-abiding faith. "I liken Heathenism to a strange plant whose brilliant fragrant blossom we regard with wonder; Christianity to the crop of nourishing grain that covers wide expanses. To the Heathen too was germinating the true God, who to the Christians had matured into fruit..."<sup>18</sup>.

The same can not be said of Grimm's student, Willhelm Mannhardt (1831-1880), for whom paganism, and the idea of its persistence, proved altogether more troubling.

Mannhardt pioneered folklore research through the use of questionnaires, sent out to willing priests and pastors across the German-speaking principalities. This new method consequently generated vast quantities of data based on eye-witness accounts<sup>19</sup>.

Influenced both by his mentor and by E. B. Tylor's theories of animism and the 'doctrine of survivals' – the notion that earlier ritual practices survived in folk customs like 'living fossils' – Mannhardt concluded that there was a direct link between the rituals of

Classical antiquity and the contemporary harvest customs of German peasants, the latter being the lingering and degenerate remnant of the former.

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<sup>17</sup> Ken Dowden, *European Paganism: The Realities of Cult from Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> Jacob Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, translated from the fourth edition by James Steven Stallybrass (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1999 [1880]), 7.

<sup>19</sup> Tove Tybjerg, "Wilhelm Mannhardt – A Pioneer in the Study of Rituals," in *Folklore: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies. Volume 2*, ed. Alan Dundes (London: Routledge, 2005).

In his *Wald and Feldkulte* (1874-6), Mannhardt noted that in rural areas the cutting of the last sheaf of corn was often accompanied by strange and rather barbaric rituals. The man who made the last stroke of the scythe was, say, tied up or ridiculed or humiliated in some way. These rites were, Mannhardt concluded, the remnants of more heinous rituals, where the vegetation spirit (thought to be caught up in the last sheaf) had to be propitiated with the sacrifice of a human representative to ensure a good harvest the following year.

Mannhardt's gothic reading of harvest customs was contested in 1934 by the Danish folklorist C. W. von Sydow, who pointed out that human representatives of plants amongst the peasantry were rare; that harvest customs had more to do with rivalry, ribaldry and festivity at the end of a gruelling season of labour than with any concern for fertility or propitiation; and that the 'spirits' of folklore were more often than not pedagogical fictions, designed to warn or scare children away from dangerous pursuits. The peasants did not literally believe in vegetation spirits any more than we believe in the bogeyman at the end of the garden<sup>20</sup>.

Following such trenchant criticism, Mannhardt's ideas ought not to have had the influence they did for, to the best of my knowledge, his voluminous books have never been translated into English. But they came to have a huge impact on the Anglophone

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<sup>20</sup> C. W. von Sydow, "The Mannhardtian Theories About the Last Sheaf and the Fertility Demons from a Modern Critical Point of View," *Folklore* 45, no. 4, 291-309.

world – and subsequently upon folk music – when they were adopted wholesale by Sir James Frazer (1854-1941).

Frazer's magnum opus, *The Golden Bough*, published in three editions between 1890 and 1915, and eventually reaching twelve volumes, is arguably one of the most influential works of the twentieth century. Drawing upon Mannhardt, Tylor and the work of his mentor, William Robertson Smith (1846-1894), Frazer constructed a thesis in which he argued that the origins of *all* religions lie in the same, primitive vegetation cult. A dying and reborn vegetation god – named differently as Osiris, Attis, Adonis, Baldur – was represented on earth by a succession of divine kings and magical priests. These embodied the god and, through seasonal and typically licentious rituals (of which Frazer included countless examples) ensured his annual return and the fertility of the crops. But when these king/priests grew old and infirm they had to be sacrificed and replaced with younger, more virile representatives lest the harvest fail.

Though Frazer's thesis and methods were roundly criticised by fellow anthropologist Andrew Lang and others<sup>21</sup>, even before his death, the influence of *The Golden Bough* upon twentieth century thought proved immense. Jesse Weston reinterpreted Arthurian legend and the Grail myth through the Frazerian lens<sup>22</sup>. Jane Ellen Harrison and the so-called Cambridge Ritualists were inspired to look for the ancient origins of Greek

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<sup>21</sup> See Robert Ackerman, Robert, *J. G. Frazer: His Life and Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles*; Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*.

<sup>22</sup> Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993 [1919]).

religion and Greek theatre. Lady Raglan famously named the array of foliate head carvings found in churches from the late middle ages onwards ‘green men’ and supposed them to be depictions of Frazer’s vegetation spirit. Anthropologist Margaret Murray reinvented the victims of the Early-Modern witch-hunts as the last remnants of Frazer’s fertility cult. The poet Robert Graves developed Frazer’s ideas, mixing them feverishly with his own fanciful notions in *The White Goddess*<sup>23</sup>. Murray and Graves, in turn, helped inspire the creation of modern Wicca<sup>24</sup>: Frazer’s mythology of the dying and reborn god remains the core upon which modern Pagan theology is constructed. And *The Golden Bough* directly influenced T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland*, Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*, *Jitterbug Perfume* by Tom Robbins, and Robin Hardy’s cult horror classic, *The Wicker Man*, to which we shall return shortly.

Most importantly for our subject here, Frazer managed to instil into popular culture a very clear idea of ‘the pagan’, ensuring that it was everywhere associated with ‘fertility’, and claiming that its attenuated vestiges persisted pretty much everywhere, at least once you started to look for them. What’s more, he branded paganism as a troubling, atavistic impulse that, like the vegetation god it was supposed to revere, could spring back to life at any moment:

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961).

<sup>24</sup> Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*.

Yet we should deceive ourselves if we imagined that the belief in witchcraft is even now dead in the mass of people; on the contrary there is ample evidence to show that it only hibernates under the chilling influence of rationalism, and that it would start into active life if that influence were ever seriously relaxed. The truth seems to be that to this day the peasant remains a pagan at heart; his civilization is merely a thin veneer which the hard knocks of life soon abrade, exposing the solid core of paganism and savagery below<sup>25</sup>.

Frazer was adamantly an intellectualist, in that he thought ‘primitive man’ arrived at paganism *rationaly*, albeit through the misapplication of scientific reasoning and a mistaken view of causality. But as the above passage illustrates, he repeatedly gives the impression of being an *emotionalist*, implying that paganism is instinctual and therefore a throwback to an earlier stage of human evolution.

Writing in the aftermath of the publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* of 1859, Frazer, like most of his contemporaries, adhered to a misunderstanding of Darwinian natural selection, so-called ‘cultural evolution.’ This purports that human cultures evolve just like species, from the simple to the complex, or, rather, from the savage to the civilized<sup>26</sup>. Cultural evolution moves at different rates in different places

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<sup>25</sup> James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion, Third Edition, Volume II. Balder the Beautiful: The Fire-Festivals of Europe and the Doctrine of the External Soul, Part I* (London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1913), viii-ix.

<sup>26</sup> Gillian Bennett, “Geologists and Folklorists: Cultural Evolution and ‘the Science of Folklore’,” *Folklore* 105, 1994, 25-37.

and so, to study a primitive tribe or a peasant ritual is therefore to step back into our evolutionary past, to see *our* culture as once it had been before the currents of progress propelled us forwards and away to a superior stage of development. “Victorians who were swallowing the idea that they were descended from apes had no trouble in accepting the concept that savages had been the next stage in human development, especially as the sequence turned the modern Western world into the end product of a triumphal story of increasing technological, cultural, and intellectual progress”<sup>27</sup>.

To an extent Frazer’s ideas proved popular because of their apparently universal explanatory power: almost any aspect of prehistory or folklore, from stone circles to folk dances, can be explained in terms of ‘fertility rites’. But the notion that paganism was something inside all of us, lurking like an inner Mr Hyde behind the outward persona of Dr Jekyll, generated a strong emotional reaction. It is this, I think, that explains quite why his ideas have endured in the way that they have and in the face of such trenchant academic criticism. To use Freud’s terminology, the ‘quality of feeling’ they elicited was one of *ambivalence*<sup>28</sup>. On the one hand paganism was abhorrent, an affront to decency and an insult to intelligence; on the other paganism was *fascinating*, titillating even, with the word ‘fertility’ suggesting all manner of delights behind its euphemistic veil. The idea that, say, a children’s playground game or a May song might have pagan origins was at

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<sup>27</sup> Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon*, 8.

<sup>28</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (London: Routledge, 2001 [1913]); Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin Books, 2003 [1919]).

once unsettling *and* thrilling; or to use another Freudian term, it instilled a sense of *das unheimliche*: the weird, eerie or uncanny, or, literally, the *unhomely*<sup>29</sup>.

Returning now to Cecil Sharp, we have a much clearer picture of the intellectual environment in which he was operating. His assertion that folk music bubbled up through the peasantry as “a purely natural instinct”<sup>30</sup> makes sense in the light of Herder, Grimm, Mannhardt and Frazer, as does his claim that certain folk songs have pagan origins. Indeed, Sharp’s contemporary folklorists and folk song collectors were working within a broadly Frazerian paradigm, convinced that through their investigations they were uncovering the indigenous remnants of the pan-European vegetation cult. Sharp’s caution regarding the origin of folk songs was rarely heeded by others, and by the time of the second great folk revival, in the aftermath of World War II, a discourse that entwined folk music with paganism had become bound into the popular imagination. Its features are as follows:

Folk song is related to paganism in that both originated as an instinctive, albeit locally contingent, response to the vicissitudes of the natural world and, more specifically, the agricultural year; the rituals and mythology of paganism are preserved in a fragmentary and attenuated way in certain folk songs; those rituals took many forms though they were always enacted (presumably with the songs to accompany them) to ensure fertility and a

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<sup>29</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*.

<sup>30</sup> Sharp, *English Folk Song*, 1.

good harvest, and they required licentious and occasionally heinous acts (human sacrifice); and finally, paganism, lying just beneath the surface of the modern world, could return at any time. Burdened with such ambivalent connotations, it is unsurprising that for many, folk music acquired an almost magical ability to evoke feelings of *das unheimliche*<sup>31</sup>.

### **John Barleycorn and the Wicker Man**

A perfect illustration of this pagan reading of folk music is provided by the traditional song, John Barleycorn. The song is perhaps one of the most popular and well-known from the British canon and has been performed by pretty much every professional folk artist of the last forty years. It was brought to the attention of the wider public when it was released by rock band, Traffic, on their album *John Barleycorn Must Die* in 1970.

The song exists in several historical versions but all concern the fate of the eponymous hero, the anthropomorphic representative of barley, and each consists of the same three structural parts: “Part A concerns the growth, harvesting, and processing of the plant, Part B the brewing process, and part C the effects of beer upon people”<sup>32</sup>. The song is unambiguously a drinking song and with the earliest version appearing in a Scottish manuscript in 1568, was composed a good eight hundred years after the formal end of paganism in Britain.

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<sup>31</sup> See Young, *Electric Eden*.

<sup>32</sup> Peter Wood, “John Barleycorn: The Evolution of a Folk-Song Family,” *Folk Music Journal* 8, no. 4, 2004, 439.



Nevertheless, the trials of John Barleycorn with his apparent death and triumphant rebirth – proving him ‘the strongest man at last’ – have rendered the song open to a popular and unshakeable Frazerian reading: it is now universally regarded as alluding to a dying and reborn vegetation god.

Thus when dynastic folk band, The Watsons, recorded it on their seminal 1965 album, *Frost and Fire: A Calendar of Ritual and Magical Songs*, they described it as “an unusually coherent figuration of the old myth of the Corn-king cut down and rising again”<sup>33</sup>. Traffic dismissed the drinking song thesis with the enigmatic but portentous statement that “there are many other interpretations”<sup>34</sup>. In 2005, Folk Award winner Chris Wood wrote that playing the song had drawn him “deeper into *the passion* of the corn”<sup>35</sup>. When in 2007, Cold Spring Records released a double CD compilation of contemporary ‘dark folk’ (of which, more later), they titled it *John Barleycorn Reborn: Dark Britannica*, explaining in the sleeve notes that “the song tells of the seasonal cycle and the vitality of the fields renewed each year by the gods (embodied by some traditions as the sun) through the symbolic sacrifice of the corn king, John Barleycorn”<sup>36</sup>. And I have heard the song played many times during modern Pagan rituals, most notably at Lughnasadh celebrations. The song has become totemic.

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<sup>33</sup> The Watsons, *Frost and Fire: A Calendar of Ritual and Magical Songs*, CD (1965, Topic Records Ltd, TSCD136, 2004), sleeve notes.

<sup>34</sup> Traffic, *John Barleycorn Must Die*, LP (Island Records, ILPS 9116, 1970).

<sup>35</sup> Chris Wood, *The Lark Descending*, CD (Ruf Records, RUFGCD10, 2005), emphasis added.

<sup>36</sup> Various Artists, *John Barleycorn Reborn: Dark Britannica* (Cold Spring, CSR84CD, 2007).

Another totemic cultural artefact, which bound ‘folk’ and ‘the pagan’ tighter still, was Robin Hardy’s 1973 horror movie, *The Wicker Man*. When an upright Presbyterian policeman, Sergeant Howie, is called to the remote Scottish island of Summerisle to investigate the disappearance of a missing girl, he discovers that the islanders have abandoned Christianity for a permissive paganism. Gradually he comes to suspect that the girl is to be sacrificed. It is a trick, and Howie himself becomes the unwitting victim, immolated in the wicker man of the title, a human sacrifice to propitiate the gods against repeated harvest failures.

The film is Frazerian through and through, not only in its plot but in the way it depicts all manner of actual folk customs (such as the use of a toad to cure a sore throat) as pagan practices: the late Anthony Schaffer, who wrote the screenplay, was explicit about his debt to *The Golden Bough*<sup>37</sup>. Lord Summerisle, ostensibly the film’s baddy, played with gusto by Christopher Lee, is Frazerian man incarnate, arriving at paganism through rational choice. He admits to Howie to being a “heathen, conceivably, but not, I hope, an unenlightened one”<sup>38</sup>. The islanders, however, are Frazerian in the unintended, emotionalist sense of having reverted to type. “The tradition of the arcane and the mysterious cleaves to the people of this island with a tenacity which makes it seem an inherent and inalienable possession” (Lord Summerisle to Howie<sup>39</sup>).

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<sup>37</sup> Allan Brown, *Inside the Wicker Man: The Morbid Ingenuities* (Basingstoke: Sidgwick & Jackson, 2000).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 222.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 217.

The Frazerian backdrop also explains the horror of the film's denouement. It is not so much that we identify with Howie, with his futile cries for mercy drowned by roar of the inferno and the music of the assembled crowd. Rather, it is that we identify more with the *islanders*; for, however much we are attracted to their licentious freedoms, the idea that it could so easily be us, singing merrily while the sacrifice burns, is what makes the film so chilling. It evokes a profound feeling of *das unheimliche* by drawing on the now deeply instilled Frazerian fear that paganism is something within us all.

Significantly, the film intensified that feeling through the cunning deployment of folk music. Composed by Paul Giovanni, the score made full use of folk's pagan and uncanny semiotic associations, and, importantly, as the film gained cult status in the years subsequent to its release, reinforced those associations in the popular imagination. "The songs" said Christopher Lee, speaking in 2002, "sum up the atmosphere of the scenes perfectly"<sup>40</sup>. As we shall see, folk musicians would only have to reference the music of *The Wicker Man* to be sure of evoking exactly the same atmosphere.

Having established the provenance of folk's association with paganism – and the emotional potency of the paganism it is supposed to preserve – it is time to examine the ways in which contemporary musicians exploit that association. I identify three – traditional folk, Pagan folk and dark folk – which must be regarded as tendencies only

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<sup>40</sup> The Wicker Man, *The Wicker Man. The Original Soundtrack Album* (CD, Silva Screen Records Ltd., FILMCD330, 2002).

and not as clearly delineated types. Folk artists may express more than one tendency at once, or none, or move between positions at different times. What the three tendencies share is that they all express alterity. Sharp set ‘the folk’ in opposition to modernity; Frazer, ‘the pagan’ to ‘the civilized’. To identify with either subjugated term is automatically to embrace otherness. Alterity needs to be proclaimed for it to acquire any potency, and the historical intertwining of folk music and paganism means that folk is the perfect vehicle for doing so<sup>41</sup>.

### **Traditional folk**

Though the folk revival instigated by Cecil Sharp was hampered somewhat by the two World Wars it continued in earnest during the second half of the twentieth century. In the fifties, folk was reinvented as a vehicle of socialism by Ewan MacColl (1915-1989), Peggy Seeger, Alan Lomax (1915-2002), Shirley Collins and others; in the sixties Davey Graham (1940-2008), Bert Jansch, John Renbourn, Martin Carthy, Roy Harper and others produced a distinctive British guitar-based folk-blues, largely under the all-pervasive influence of Bob Dylan; in the seventies folk was fused with rock by Fairport Convention and Steeleye Span; in the eighties a wave of anti-Thatcher sentiment made folk political again, producing figures like Billy Bragg and bands like the Pogues and the Levellers; and from the late nineties onwards folk became increasingly professionalized, bootstrapping itself into the wider British music industry<sup>42</sup>. Now an agglomeration of

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<sup>41</sup> Andy Letcher, “The Role of the Bard in Contemporary Pagan Movements” (PhD. Thesis, King Alfred’s College, Winchester, 2001).

<sup>42</sup> Young, *Electric Eden*.

agents, festival organisers, record-, TV- and radio- producers, CD distributors, journalists and artists together comprise a ‘folk industry’, while, at the same time pub sessions, ceilidhs and folk clubs cater for an important ground layer of amateur players. But, however much traditional folk has adapted itself to the market, and as the name suggests, it remains profoundly concerned with the correct and proper maintenance of ‘tradition’.

Ostensibly, traditional folk musicians play traditional folk music, which is to say the corpus of songs, ballads and carols collected by Sharp and his contemporaries, and a body of English, Welsh, Scottish and Irish instrumental tunes – some of which date back to collections from the seventeenth century or even earlier – using traditional acoustic instruments: fiddle, flute, whistle, melodeon, concertina, guitar, mandolin, bagpipes and so on. However, the way in which traditional material is played, and the contexts in which it is performed, have changed so much, and so radically, that they share little in common with the music of ‘source singers’ like John England.

So, while John England and others of his ilk sung unaccompanied and unpaid, modern traditional folk musicians support songs with backing and the harmonic know-how of classical music and jazz. Far from being the products of an oral tradition, many professional folk musicians have undergone classical training, often to a high degree, and learn their material from written sources or recordings. Musicians do not just play traditional material but compose new songs and tunes in a traditional style. And today,

folk musicians form bands, record albums, play concerts to paying audiences, and expect to make a living from their music, all of which would have astounded John England.

There is therefore a contradiction that runs through the contemporary traditional music scene. On the one hand, traditional folk is as beholden to the market expectations of novelty and innovation as any other aspect of the British popular music industry and as such has been continually influenced by contemporaneous musical trends. (Thus, for example, the guitar – the iconic instrument of ‘the folk singer’ – was actually imported into British folk music from America during the fifties.) On the other hand, the scene has taken upon itself the self-appointed task of upholding, maintaining and protecting the ‘tradition’ – “that great act of faith which is our indigenous musical inheritance”<sup>43</sup> – from exactly the kinds of innovations that market forces and contemporaneous trends would impress upon it. These tensions, between innovation and tradition, between the individual and ‘the folk’, have an important bearing upon traditional folk’s relationship to the supposed pagan origins of its music.

Within traditional folk paganism (as laid out in the Frazerian paradigm) is regarded ambivalently. In 2006, Norma Waterson and her husband Martin Carthy released an album of seasonal songs, a homage to the seminal *Frost and Fire* of 1965, titled *Holy Heathens and the Old Green Man*. Unlike its predecessor and apart from the obvious

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<sup>43</sup> Wood, *The Lark Descending*.

implications of the title, there were no direct references to paganism in the sleeve notes<sup>44</sup>. Instead, attention and due deference were given to the tradition, that is, the sources from which the duo acquired the material.

On his 2005 album *The Lark Descending*, Chris Wood – a torchbearer like Carthy and Waterson – recorded the results of his collaboration with storyteller, Hugh Lupton. Two of the songs, ‘Bleary Winter’ and ‘Walk this World,’ make distinctly Frazerian references, evoking the (supposed) pagan origins of folk customs. In 2006, Wood and Lupton were commissioned by BBC Radio 3 to make a ‘radio ballad’ about the traditional midwinter mummers’ plays. The programme, *England in Ribbons*, mixed music, song, and storytelling with archive recordings<sup>45</sup>. A version of one of its songs, a setting of a traditional mummers’ play to music, also called ‘England in Ribbons’, appeared on Wood’s 2007 album *Trespasser*. Wood took a Frazerian reading of the drama, calling it an “enduring midwinter ritual” of death and resurrection, and “English Voodoo at its finest!”<sup>46</sup>. However, all Wood’s Frazerian allusions appear to be for poetic or rhetorical purposes only for he is an avowed and vocal atheist. On *Trespasser* he recorded what must count as the first (and probably only) atheist ‘spiritual’, ‘Come Down Jehovah’.

Leaving personal religious orientation to one side, a clue to traditional folk’s ambivalence towards paganism can be found right back on The Watsons’ 1965 *Frost and Fire*.

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<sup>44</sup> Waterson: Carthy, *Holy Heathens and the Old Green Man* (CD, Topic Records Ltd., TSCD562, 2006).

<sup>45</sup> Available at: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/worldmusic/feature\\_mummers.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/worldmusic/feature_mummers.shtml)

<sup>46</sup> Chris Wood, *Trespasser* (CD, Ruf Records, RUFCD10, 2007).

Ostensibly at least, it appeared as if this band of unaccompanied singers were openly acknowledging folk's debt to the pagan past. The sleeve notes, however, reveal an almost Marxist distaste for it: "So much is talked of myth and sun worship and such, that it's necessary to recall that behind most of these calendar customs and the songs attached to them lies nothing more mysterious, nothing less realistic, than the yearly round of work carried out in the fields...it's due to their relation with economic life, not to any mystical connection, that the song-customs have persisted right up to our own time"<sup>47</sup>.

Here then is the problem. People come to folk music for many reasons, but serious and committed folk enthusiasts (nicknamed 'folkies') are attracted to it not just because they like how it sounds or what it says, but because of the powerful sense of identity that belonging to the tradition confers. Being a folkie is to feel one with the 'common man', an identification that confers stability, continuity, community and respectability. But the lingering Frazerian orthodoxy, which states that the tradition is founded on heinous rituals and irrational superstition, does not sit well fit with this preferred notion of the 'folk' as producers and holders of a kind of canny, earthy, Herderian wisdom or common sense (or as Chris Wood puts it, '*the common sense*'<sup>48</sup>). The Frazerian paradigm undermines that sense of stability and respectability, is upsetting or dangerous, and needs to be made safe (just as the Watsons do.) In traditional folk, therefore, pagan associations tend to be employed as lyrical or poetic devices, and typically in the service

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<sup>47</sup> The Watsons, *Frost and Fire*.

<sup>48</sup> Chris Wood, *pers. comm.*



of an implicit working class discourse: that folk songs are the songs of the working people, born out of the seasonal round of hard, physical labour.

### **Pagan Folk**

Modern Pagans do not have such qualms: given that folk music is supposed to have pagan origins it is unsurprising that modern Pagan religionists should want to play folk music and to use it to express religious identities. In my doctoral investigation of music within contemporary Paganism<sup>49</sup>, I found that performers mostly adapted the kind of music they ordinarily played outside Pagan contexts, be it blues, rock or folk, to Pagan themes. That said, because many performance settings require that players play acoustically – at camps and festivals, say – and necessarily because of folk’s pagan associations, there is a gravitational pull towards playing traditional songs and tunes. But lacking at present a distinct musical style, Pagan identity music is best defined by its lyrical content and subject matter.

Perhaps the most famous Pagan musician in Britain today, and the closest that Paganism has to a star, is Damh the Bard (pronounced ‘Dave the Bard’). Damh is a Druid, an active member of Druidry’s largest Order, the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids (OBOD), and a regular performer at Pagan moots, camps and conferences. He has released six albums

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<sup>49</sup> Letcher, *The Role of the Bard*

to date and a book of his most popular songs; he keeps a regular blog and produces a monthly 'Druidcast' of Pagan music and interviews<sup>50</sup>.

Live, Damh accompanies himself on acoustic guitar and often constructs his songs around rock chord progressions (he began his musical life as a drummer in a metal band), adding big, anthemic choruses. Folkier elements are more apparent on his albums, where mandolin, whistle and harp add melodic lines. The songs are almost always expressly about Pagan themes and he intersperses his compositions with traditional folk songs that lend themselves to Pagan readings, such as the Cornish May song, 'Hal an Tow'.

The chorus of his 'Spirit of Albion', from the 2006 album of the same name provides a good example of his work.

The Crane, the wolf,  
the bear and the boar,  
No longer dwell upon these shores,  
You say that the Goddess and God  
have gone,  
Well I tell you they live on!  
For in the cities and hills,  
And in circles of stone,

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<sup>50</sup> [www.paganmusic.co.uk](http://www.paganmusic.co.uk)

The voices of the Old Ways,  
The Spirit of Albion is calling you home!<sup>51</sup>

The song, a fast minor waltz, presents the pagan past as a time when wild animals were still extant and hence the land was in some sense more vital. As a Pagan, Damh has regained a magical connection to the land, its God and Goddess, and the ‘Old Ways’. To be a Pagan is necessarily to reawaken to the ‘Spirit of Albion’, to heal the sense of alienation between ourselves and nature caused by modernity, and thus to come ‘home’.

The figure of the Bard is central to Druidry, as is the quest for *awen*, or inspiration, a kind of divine afflatus that can supposedly be channelled into creative acts<sup>52</sup>. Druid groups have established public bardic competitions in Bath, Glastonbury, Exeter, Winchester and other towns and cities. The winner, who is judged to have composed the best poem or song on a given theme, holds the ‘Bardic chair’ for a year, and is expected to undertake public performances and workshops to promote the bardic arts<sup>53</sup>. As with Damh’s material, bardic songs tend not to be devotional, or hymns, but refer to insider, Pagan themes and therefore serve to proclaim a religious identity.

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<sup>51</sup> Damh the Bard, *The Spirit of Albion* (CD, self-released available from [www.paganmusic.co.uk](http://www.paganmusic.co.uk), 2006). Lyrics printed with the author’s permission.

<sup>52</sup> Andy Letcher, “What is a Bard?,” in *The 2012 Mount Haemus Awards* (Lewes: The Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, forthcoming).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*; Kevan Manwaring, *The Bardic Handbook: The Complete Manual for the Twenty-First Century Bard* (Glastonbury: Gothic Image Publications).

Another, less well-known genre of Pagan folk flourished during the 1990s, emerging out of radical environmental protest culture, a genre I term tribedelica<sup>54</sup>. The 90s saw a range of protests against airport expansion, car culture, GM crops, live animal exports, and, most famously, road-building, that produced a lively counter-culture which was broadly (though not exclusively) Pagan in outlook. Eco-Paganism spoke the language of Paganism – often marking full moons and the eight festivals of the wheel of the year – but eschewed formal group affiliation and choreographed ritual. Eco-Paganism was something *celebrated*, and the best way to express any religious sentiment one might feel towards the natural world was to do something active to protect it. The slogan ‘Gaia told me to do it’ was the nearest thing to an Eco-Pagan manifesto<sup>55</sup>.

Eco-Paganism acquired its own mythology, the belief that protesters were some prehistoric tribe, returned to save the land from the ravages of modernity and to usher back an ‘archaic revival’<sup>56</sup>, an ecstatic and psychedelic form of paganism that would reconnect culture and nature. ‘Pok’ – aka Simon Miller, lead singer of tribedelic band, Space Goats (and who in fact coined the term tribedelica) – called that feeling of ecstatic connection with the land ‘enhurment’: the band’s mantra, and mission statement, was

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<sup>54</sup> Letcher, *The Role of the Bard*.

<sup>55</sup> Andy Letcher, “‘Gaia told me to do it’: Resistance and the Idea of Nature Within Contemporary British Eco-Paganism”, *EcoTheology* 8 (2003), 61-84; Andy Letcher, “‘There’s Bulldozers in the Fairy Garden’: Re-Enchantment Narratives in British Eco-Paganism”, in *Popular Spiritualities: The Politics of Contemporary Enchantment*, ed. Lynne Hume and Kathleen Phillips (London: Ashgate, 2005).

<sup>56</sup> Terence McKenna, *The Archaic Revival: Speculations on Psychedelic Mushrooms, the Amazon, Virtual Reality, UFOs, Evolution, Shamanism, the Rebirth of the Goddess, and the End of History* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

‘get thee enhurued’<sup>57</sup>. The Dongas Tribe – the original road-protesters from Twyford Down, near Winchester – actually lived for a while as an itinerant tribe, travelling the droves of southern England with hand-carts, goats, chickens and musical instruments.

As a musical genre, tribedelica was a kind of upbeat psychedelic folk that mixed medieval-style tunes and drones with the rhythms of techno to produce a self-consciously acoustic ‘organic trance’. Favoured instruments included fiddle, whistle, hammered dulcimer, mandolin, bouzouki, saz, djembe, didgeridoo, hurdy-gurdy and bagpipes, instruments that were unusual and exotic and in themselves signs of otherness and alterity. As well as the Space Goats and the Dongas Tribe, bands included Heathens All and my own Jabberwocky. A much greater range of individual songwriters and performers were captured on a series of cassette releases, ‘Tribal Voices’, recorded around the country at various protest sites<sup>58</sup>.

Songs were almost exclusively about Eco-Pagan themes: about protecting the Earth and the re-enchanted sense of belonging that would result for those who did. The Space Goats’ first album, *Inamorata*, told the story of an eponymous heroine, travelling to Avebury stone circle to raise up a slumbering dragon (a symbol for the mysterious earth

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<sup>57</sup> Simon Miller, *pers. comm.*

<sup>58</sup> [www.tribalvoices.org.uk](http://www.tribalvoices.org.uk)

energy, supposedly channelled by prehistoric megalithic builders<sup>59</sup>) and thereby to save the land<sup>60</sup>.

The typical tribedelic performance (when not actually providing a soundtrack for actual protests) was the participatory fireside jam. When, in the mid nineties, various protesters started travelling to the annual Rencontres Internationales des Luthiers et Maîtres Sonneurs (the International Meeting of Instrument Makers and Master Pipers) at Saint Chartier in Central France, they started to incorporate French and Breton bagpipe tunes, with accompanying dances, into their music. This led to protracted sessions in which these austere and superficially simple tunes were played repeatedly for twenty minutes or more as vehicles of enhurment. Tribedelica effectively ended with the hiatus in road-building in Britain at the end of the nineties, but many of its leading figures have gone on to become professional or semi-professional folk musicians, playing for French and Breton dance in Britain and Europe.

Finally, brief mention must be made of the growth in explicitly Pagan Morris sides.

Frazer thought Morris dancing the relic of a fertility rite, and though this fancy has long been disproved (it originated as a Tudor Court dance<sup>61</sup>) it is a stubborn myth that persists in popular culture: if Morris dancing is pagan then it stands to reason that modern Pagans

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<sup>59</sup> Andy Letcher, "Raising the Dragon: Folklore and the Development of Contemporary British Eco-Paganism", *The Pomegranate* 6, no. 2 (2004), 175-198.

<sup>60</sup> Space Goats, *Inamorata and Other Tales* (cassette, self-released, available from [www.pondlifestudios.com](http://www.pondlifestudios.com), 1993).

<sup>61</sup> Ronald Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford: oxford University Press, 2006).

should Morris dance. Border Morris is the favoured style. Less precise than Cotswold Morris, Border Morris uses sticks rather than handkerchiefs; dancers wear be-feathered top hats and elaborately tattered costumes; and the rowdy dances are performed with considerable verve and gusto to the accompaniment of melodeons, drums and occasionally bagpipes. The Wild Hunt, Armaleggan and Vixen Morris are just three Pagan sides (the latter being comprised of women) and most are Wiccan in orientation. They dance publicly, but regard what they do as a covert but necessary form of seasonal worship.

### **Dark Folk**

I have already mentioned Cold Spring's 2007 compilation, *John Barleycorn Reborn* (which, as I write, has just been followed by a successor, *We Bring you a King with a Head of Gold*<sup>62</sup>). That an underground label specializing in 'dark industrial', 'black ambient', 'doom' and 'power electronics'<sup>63</sup>, saw fit to release an album of folk music is perhaps surprising (though not in the light of the connections that the present volume illuminates), although their definition of folk is rather different from that of the traditionalists described above. The sleeve notes state: "There has been a growing seam of alternative folk music emerging since the folk revival of the 1950s moving beyond concerns about popular music and exploring the original traditions whilst incorporating a range of progressive or experimental styles. This is largely unacknowledged within the

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<sup>62</sup> Various Artists, *We Bring you a King with a Head of Gold: Dark Britannica II* (CD, Cold Spring, CSR100CD, 2010).

<sup>63</sup> Cold Spring, *Cold Spring: What we are*, [http://www.coldspring.co.uk/what\\_we\\_are.php](http://www.coldspring.co.uk/what_we_are.php)

area of [traditional] folk music but is equally sincere in its aims”<sup>64</sup>. That those ‘original traditions’ were pagan (and hence Frazerian) is suggested in the name Cold Spring supplied for the genre: ‘dark folk’ (though elsewhere it is known as strange folk, wyrd folk, twisted folk, nu-folk, alt-folk, prog folk, psych folk, folkedelia, acid folk or post-folk).

Unlike Pagan folk, dark folk is more obviously a defined musical genre. It consists of folk songs performed in a ‘progressive’, ‘experimental’, or psychedelic manner – that is, through the mixing of traditional and electric instruments with overt use of digital processing and textures – or new songs about pagan, Frazerian, themes. It makes extensive use of minor modes (dorian, aeolian and to a lesser extent, phrygian); drones (played using synths, looped samples or instruments such as bagpipes, hurdy-gurdies, Indian tanpuras and shruti boxes); sparse or austere harmonies; and bells, chimes and other percussion. The tempo is typically slow or downbeat and the music is self-consciously uncanny.

Dark folk makes implicit and explicit reference to bands such as mordant entho-goth minimalists, Dead Can Dance, and to the array of prog, psychedelic and underground folk and folk-rock bands that flourished during the late sixties and early seventies, the so-called ‘progressive moment’: The Incredible String Band, Pentangle, Comus, Fairport

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<sup>64</sup> Various Artists, *John Barleycorn Reborn*.



Convention, The Young Tradition, and C.O.B., to name a few<sup>65</sup>. And dark folk repeatedly references the most totemic music of all: the soundtrack to *The Wicker Man*. Semiotically complex, therefore, dark folk is knowingly referential. It both evokes the imagined pagan past *and* a period of recent musical and cultural history that has, for artists who were mostly children at the time, become something of a golden age.

Dark folk gained popularity and came to prominence during the noughties thanks to a number of factors: the release of a series of compilations of underground or acid folk from the 60s and 70s – *Fuzzy Felt Folk*, *Gather in the Mushrooms: The British Acid Folk Underground*, *Early Morning Hush: Notes From the UK Folk Underground 1969-1976*; the first, complete stereo release of *The Wicker Man* soundtrack; the release of similar compilations of contemporary dark folk – *John Barleycorn Reborn*, *Strange Folk* and *Folk Off!*, the latter compiled by DJ Rob da Bank; popular and carefully marketed festivals that catered expressly for this music – The Green Man and Moseley Folk festivals; interest from magazines and webzines – Shindig Magazine, Magpie Magazine, the Ptolomaic Terrascope and Spiral Earth; and media interest from the then rock critic of *The Times*, Pete Paphides, and *The Guardian*'s Will Hodgkinson<sup>66</sup>. The former appeared

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<sup>65</sup> See Blake, *The Land Without Music*; Young, *Electric Eden*.

<sup>66</sup> Various Artists, *Fuzzy-Felt Folk. A Small Collection of Rare, Delightful Folk Oddities for Strange Adults and Maybe Their Children Too* (CD, Trunk Records, JBH018CD, 2006); Various Artists, 2004. *Gather in the Mushrooms. The British Acid Folk Underground 1968-1974* (CD, Sanctuary Records, CMQCD840, 2004); Various Artists, *Early Morning Hush: Notes From the UK Folk Underground 1969-1976* (CD, Sanctuary Records, CMQCD1265); The Wicker Man, *The Wicker Man*; Various Artists, *John Barleycorn Reborn*; Various Artists, *Strange Folk* (CD, Albion Records, 2006); Various Artists, *Folk Off: New Folk and Psychedelia From the British Isles and North America – Compiled by Rob da Bank* (CD, Sunday Best, SBESTCD12, 2006). The influence of American nu-folk artists such as Devendra Banhart, Joanna Newsom, and Espers, was also significant, but a full discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

in an article about ‘new folk’ on BBC2’s *The Culture Show*, broadcast on 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2007, while the latter wrote a series of articles for *The Guardian* about his efforts to set up a record label, ‘Big Bertha’, and to promote the Cornish dark folk band Thistletown (whose album *Rosemarie* was released on Big Bertha in 2007).

Other dark folk acts include cod-medievalists Circulus, Tunng, The Eighteenth Day of May, The Owl Service, Sieben, Pantalaimon, Mary Hampton, Tinkerscuss, Vashti Bunyan (who began her career in the 60s), Drohne, English Heretic, and my own Telling the Bees.

These three tendencies – traditional folk, Pagan folk and dark folk – are, of course, exactly that – tendencies – and the messy world is more complicated than my typology would suggest. For example, Sharron Kraus is a folk singer with an underground, cult following in Britain and America. She is openly a Pagan and an occultist and has released her own round of Frazerian-themed, seasonal songs, *Right Wantonly a-Mumming*<sup>67</sup>. By rights she ‘belongs’ in Pagan folk. However, her songs, which employ drones, chimes, liberal use of minor seconds, and unsettling lyrics, all performed with her idiosyncratic spidery voice, evoke a profound feeling of *das unheimliche*, and so typify dark folk. And yet she is also a traditional singer and player, a stalwart of folk clubs and sessions. She belongs to all categories, and none, striking her own path through the contested realm of folk.

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<sup>67</sup> Sharron Kraus, *Right Wantonly a-Mumming. A Collection of Seasonal Songs and Celebrations by Sharron Kraus* (CD, Bo’Weavil Recordings, weavil25CD, 2006).

## **Folk, Paganism and das unheimliche**

Our notions of ‘folk music’ and ‘the pagan’ are historically intertwined, sharing roots that go back to German romanticism and the idealism of Herder and Grimm. This odd symbiosis has bequeathed us the idea that folk music is something old and other, at odds with modernity and urban living. Most of us now live in towns or cities but folk music typically expresses a desire for the supposed rooted certainties of the countryside and a lost bucolic golden age<sup>68</sup>. Clearly the popularity of both folk and Paganism says much about our contemporary and oft-commented yearning for an imagined, enchanted past<sup>69</sup>.

Though the fortunes of folk music wax and wane in cycles far less predictable than those that drive the agricultural year, its renewed fecundity has much to do with the wealth of pagan connotations it has accrued, and, as a result, its power to invoke *das unheimliche*. For traditional folk musicians it is the *homeliness* afforded by tradition that matters and so ‘the pagan’ can only be brought inside occasionally, like a dangerous guest, before being sent firmly on its way again. By contrast, those magical and uncanny connotations are exactly what attract modern Pagans to folk music. They, too, are looking for a sense of home, only this time a re-enchanted one, one imbued with what Damh the Bard calls the ‘Spirit of Albion’. The risk, of course, is that in doing so, by making *das unheimliche*,

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<sup>68</sup> Boyes, *The Imagined Village*; Young, *Electric Eden*.

<sup>69</sup> See Letcher, *op. cit.*, 2006; Lynne Hume and Kathleen McPhillips, eds, *Popular Spiritualities: The Politics of Contemporary Enchantment* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2006).

*heimliche* – the unhomely, homely – they strip folk music of the very thing that gave it its attractive power in the first place.

But when the pagan past is alluded to, hinted at, touched upon, or evoked such that the imagination can fill in the gaps with all its ambivalent relish – as dark folk self-consciously attempts to do – then folk’s ability to unsettle us, to upset the ordered certainties of urban life and to make us feel anything but at home, finds full expression. Folk was never pagan but the twentieth century made it so. Now, for many, it embodies or is synonymous with the idea of the pagan, a pervasive, if mistaken, myth of our origins. Consequently it provides modern musicians with a fecund source of inspiration, one that will undoubtedly provide a rich harvest for years to come. Or, as The Watsons put it back in 1965, “to our toiling ancestors...[folk songs]...meant everything, and in a queer irrational way they can still mean much to us”<sup>70</sup>.

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<sup>70</sup> The Watsons, *Frost and Fire*.

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